DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 660 CE 051 390

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TITLE Teaching Adults More Effectively. Techniques.
PUB DATE Nov 88
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Lifelong Learning; v12 n3 p29-30 Nov 1988

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Adults; Andragogy; *Classroom Techniques; Cognitive Style; Educational Philosophy; Educational Planning; *Learning Strategies; *Learning Theories; Lesson Plans; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Teaching adults more effectively is a concern common to business, industry, professionals, and educators. An examination of research dealing with effective teaching shows that six functions can be identified and followed as steps in the instruction of adults: (1) review of previous learning and skills; (2) initial presentation of material through an overview; (3) guided practice; (4) corrective feedback from the instructor; (5) independent work by the students; and (6) frequent review of material. These six teaching functions serve as organizers for planning and conducting continuing education for adults. The sequence is easily applied to adult needs and provides opportunities for more positive self-development through skill demonstration. At each step, adults are reinforced with the successful accomplishment of tasks, leading to good feelings about learning and reinforcing motivation to learn. (KC)

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TECHNíQUES

Teaching adults more effectively

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By Robert Wendell

How to teach adults more effectively is a concern common to business, industry, professionals, and educators. Malcolm Knowles (1970) advanced the idea of the adult as an independent, self-directed learner when he described andragogy as different from pedagogy. Teaching adults was different as human resource development personnel knew so well. Today there is a body of knowledge about adult learning characteristics that translates into teaching strategies that appear effective. This article will examine the research dealing with effective teaching for clues applicable to instructing adults.

Teaching Functions

Humans process information in small steps so as not to overload the mind. Further, teachers of adults should provide active practice opportunities containing frequent repetitions to encourage automatic transfer of prior knowledge and its application to new skills. Learning research suggests a sequence of steps are available for more effective instruction. Let's examine these teaching procedures.

Rosenshine (1986) has both reviewed the research literature on effective instruction as well as conducted significant studies dealing with learning improvement. His summary of the data serves as the bases for the following statements on teaching functions. It becomes evident as each of the six functions are discussed that adult instruction should follow these steps. The nature of the adult learner necessitates the application of these six procedures to any form of adult instruction. As adults age, skills and knowledge fade psychologically when not used or reinforced. If an employer expects the adult to utilize prior knowledge and transfer it to new skills, then a carefully organized and sequenced lesson is mandatory.

The first function is *review*. A review of previous learning, pre-requisite skills is required. Reteaching is necessary if either a pre-test, demonstration, or verbal review reflects inadequate skill levels at this stage. Without review and/or reteaching, the introduction of new material will most likely be confusing and result in psychological frustration. Adults who are already reluctant about "schools", unsure of their abilities to read, think, learn,and compete with others, need an early success to settle their psychological fears. Even a pretest can appear too formal, too threatening if presented dictatorially. A better atmosphere and attitude is created when adults are carefully led in small-steps through a review of skills they possess thus serving to reinforce a positive self-image.

Second, the *presentation* or demonstration of material is provided through an overview that recalls the prior skills and knowledge adults possess and in a one-skill-at-a-time fashion leads adults to mastery. This acquisition of new knowledge is accomplished in small steps using many concrete and positive examples each step of the way. To avoid information overload, the instructor must find a suitable pace by asking many questions of the class, giving redundant explanations on misunderstood points, using clear language and avoiding digressions clearly off the subject. Important at this stage is not confusing the adult learner with new material that apparently has little relationship to former knowledge. Always show relationships, clearly asking adults to give examples from experience that shows the application. If new material is presented for which there is not apparent prior association, then the instructor must take even greater care to give an introductory overview of the concept and move slowly, deliberately, step-by-step through the sequence. It is essential that adults be provided numerous examples and opportunities to use this new knowledge.

Third, continuous *guided practice* leading to a high degree of mastery provides a significant level of skill and positive feeling of accomplishment for the adult. The intent is that all students will practice and receive feedback that explains and supplements the process. Practice is appropriate at this stage because it allows repetition of content, the formulation of automatic transfer, and freeing space in the mind for additional material. All students need to demonstrate a mastery level grasp of the material and this can be accomplished through written or verbal responses, small group discussions, and tutorials. Important is the need for continuous practice until each adult demonstrates skill with the material.

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Fourth, during practice opportunities should exist for the instructor to provide *corrective feedback*. When student responses are correct, the teacher should acknowledge the answer and go on with the lesson. If the student response is incorrect, careless, or hesitant, the instructor gives the right answer and provides a brief process answer, leading the student through the steps again. Reteaching is essential at this stage because, as Gagne (1970) suggests, learning is hierarchical. What is not mastered at one level, will not transfer meaningfully to the next level, leading to mental confusion, feelings of frustration, and a developing attitude of "I can't seem to do this."

Fifth, students are now encouraged to work *independently*. At this stage, a number of successful repetitions leads to automatic transfer and overlearning. Students individually work on questions, worksheets, models, and check with

a partner for accuracy. The instructor directs students through difficult material with short sequences of practice and instruction, individually or small groups, with lots of explanation, repetition, demonstration, and feedback. Repetition, application, and transfer are the desired sequences of learning. Material is therefore organized to lead the learner toward mastery and a positive learning experience. Independent study is not always a homework assignment. Rather, it should be accomplished in class—allowing time for the instructor to ensure that each student understands and is practicing correctly. Confusion over the material should not be allowed to "go home" with the adult. Clarity contributes to positive attitudes that lead to competent demonstrations of newly developed skills.

Sixth, frequent *review* of material is necessary if the skill for knowledge is to remain viable. Daily, certainly weekly, reviews are suggested. All too often students and instructors alike assume that once material is learned, it will be retained. However, learning research clearly shows that unused knowledge rapidly creates cognitive interference, mental overload, and is forgotten. Through application in such forms as tests, on the job performance, or demonstration, review ensures meaningful learning and a more competent adult.

Summary

These six teaching functions serve as organizers for planning and conducting continuing education for adults. This sequence is easily applied to adult needs and provides opportunities for more positive self-development through skill demonstration. At each step, adults are reinforced with the successful accomplishment of tasks at that stage of the procedure. This contributes to feeling "good" about learning this material, and further reinforces an "I-can-do-it" attitude received from the teacher and through obvious self-demonstration of the skill. The sequential presentation of material, reteaching, reinforcing, guided practice, independent practice, and serious review, all contribute to mastery learning for adults. This article maintains that effective teaching leads to effective learning for adults. Perhaps the accumulated contributions of learning theorists, practitioners, and researchers are finally significant enough to permit instructors to plan and conduct their lessons more *effectively*. **AAACE**

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